DEAD VOLTAGE:

A Theoretical Framework for the Systematic Non-Conversion of Genuine Drive

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Abstract

Existing frameworks for understanding the failure of human potential, including akrasia, learned helplessness, impostor syndrome, and structural discrimination, locate failure either in the person or in the system. A distinct and undertheorized phenomenon persists: individuals who possess demonstrable drive and genuine passion yet systematically fail to convert this energy into recognized outcomes, not through deficiency of will or talent but through a fundamental mismatch between the register in which they generate and the register in which systems of recognition receive. We term this Dead Voltage, a condition that locates persistent non-conversion not within the person or the institution, but at the Interface between them. Drawing on Bourdieu's capital conversion, Weber's calling, Fanon's unrecognized interiority, Fricker's epistemic injustice, and self-determination theory, this paper introduces Dead Voltage as a conceptual construct and proposes a tripartite model (Generation, Interface, Reception) that locates failure at the Interface rather than in the person or system. The paper distinguishes two primary configurations: Involuntary Dead Voltage, in which structural mismatch prevents

conversion across three subtypes (Structurally Displaced, Register-Mismatched, Legible but Excluded), and Volitional Dead Voltage, in which the individual understands the available translation and refuses it on grounds of fidelity integrity. The paper further proposes that pure recognition is asymptotically approachable but not fully achievable, and that the Volitional subject's refusal is located at the misrecognition threshold, the point beyond which translation loss renders recognition misdirected rather than genuine. Implications for recognition theory, institutional ethics, and psychological practice are developed.

Keywords: dead voltage, passion-outcome gap, interface mismatch, capital conversion, recognition theory, epistemic injustice, self-determination, volitional refusal

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of why genuine drive fails to produce recognized outcomes has preoccupied philosophy and psychology for centuries. Existing explanations accumulate in layers: moral weakness, structural oppression, cognitive distortion, neurological deficit. Each captures something real. None accounts for a specific and recurring phenomenon: the person who burns, genuinely, and produces nothing the world recognizes.

This is not the story of the lazy. Laziness is the absence of drive. What concerns us here is its presence, confirmed, sustained, and ultimately inert in its effects. Nor is it the story of the blocked: no diagnosable anxiety disorder, no trauma-induced freeze, no identifiable cognitive distortion. The individual acts, pursues, invests, with a seriousness that is, by any internal measure, real. And the world does not respond.

Existing frameworks stop short of naming this precisely. Akrasia addresses the failure to act on what one values. Dead Voltage is not an action failure. The person acts. Learned helplessness describes motivational collapse following uncontrollable outcomes. Dead Voltage may precede this or never produce it; the drive persists. Impostor syndrome locates failure in distorted self-perception. Dead Voltage does not require distorted self-perception; the individual may assess themselves accurately and still find that accuracy irrelevant to outcomes. Structural discrimination describes reception failure with an identifiable agent. Dead Voltage can occur without identifiable discrimination and can coexist with apparent access.

What is missing from these accounts is a framework for the Interface: the space between a person's internal generative capacity and the recognition systems that determine social,

economic, and political outcomes. Passion is not capital. Drive is not currency. Intensity without legibility does not convert. The failure is relational: it occurs at the point of contact between a self and a system.

We propose the term Dead Voltage. The metaphor is deliberate: voltage is real electrical potential, measurable, present, not imagined. Dead voltage is not the absence of charge. It is charge without a circuit, energy that exists fully and converts into nothing, not because the energy is insufficient but because the path to ground has not been completed.

The terrain Dead Voltage occupies is not uncharted. Fricker's (2007) hermeneutical injustice, Bourdieu's (1986) capital misconversion, Fanon's (1952) account of colonial epistemic exclusion, and Honneth's (1992, 1995) recognition theory each illuminate portions of it. What has been missing is integration: a construct unified enough to operate across these traditions and to name the specific mechanism of conversion failure: register mismatch between generative and receptive encoding, where register denotes the specific mode, idiom, and form in which a person produces. Dead Voltage is not the first account of institutional illegibility. It is the first to name the Interface as the site of failure and to propose a mechanism operationalizable across domains, contexts, and the full range of conditions under which genuine drive fails to convert.

The contribution is best understood as integration and relocation rather than discovery. We are providing a map precise enough to navigate territory that has been circled, partially charted, and approached from multiple shores without a unified cartography.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 The Construct

We propose Dead Voltage as a construct defined by the systematic non-conversion of genuine internal drive into externally recognized outcomes, arising from a fundamental mismatch between the register in which a person generates and the register in which systems of recognition receive, not from deficiency of will, absence of competence, or identifiable structural exclusion alone.

Three criteria must be satisfied. First, authenticity of drive: the internal passion is genuine, sustained, self-directed, and resistant to easy substitution. Second, presence of effort: the individual has translated drive into action: the potential has been deployed and failed to convert. Third, absence of sufficient alternative explanation: the non-conversion cannot be fully accounted for by laziness, clinical impairment, or identifiable discriminatory exclusion alone. Principled refusal to translate does not constitute a sufficient alternative explanation, as refusal is itself downstream of the Interface condition, a response to the logic of fidelity loss rather than an independent cause of non-conversion.

Box 1. Operational Definition of Dead Voltage

Dead Voltage exists when all three conditions are met:

1. Authentic drive: genuine, sustained, intrinsically motivated, register-specific
2. Sustained effort: drive has been deployed into action; the conversion has been attempted
3. Residual non-conversion: failure cannot be fully explained by laziness, clinical impairment, or identifiable discrimination

Dead Voltage names what remains unexplained after these alternative explanations have been applied. It is a relational condition located at the Interface between a person's generative register and a system's receptive encoding.

2.2 Distinction from Adjacent Constructs

The construct is distinguished from five adjacent frameworks: akrasia, learned helplessness, impostor syndrome, structural discrimination, and low conscientiousness, by a single structural difference: each locates failure either in the person or in the system. Dead Voltage locates it at the Interface between them. Where the drive is genuine, the effort sustained, and the failure residual after these alternatives are applied, we are in Dead Voltage territory.

2.3 What Dead Voltage Is

We propose Dead Voltage as a relational construct, one that does not reside in the person alone, nor in the system alone, but at the point of contact between them, and cannot be diagnosed by examining either in isolation. We further propose it as a structural construct: not randomly distributed, it is likely to cluster among individuals whose generative register diverges from the modes that dominant institutions were built to recognize. And it is, for its involuntary configurations, a pre-resentment construct: it names the condition before the curdling Nietzsche identified as ressentiment, when the drive is still intact and the failure is still experienced as a problem to be solved. The Volitional configuration, as developed in Section VI, does not follow this trajectory: having refused the available terms of translation, the Volitional subject neither converts nor curdles. This paper is itself written in a register that dominant academic institutions readily receive, an instantiation of the phenomenon it describes. The translation required to

render Dead Voltage legible to these institutions carries its own energy tax and fidelity loss. We name this not to apologize for it but to make it visible.

III. THE TRIPARTITE MODEL

3.1 Generation, Interface, Reception

The tripartite model locates conversion failure at the Interface: the space between Generation and Reception, rather than in either component alone. Figure 1 presents the model with its four Interface conditions.

Figure 1. The Dead Voltage Tripartite Model

GENERATION	Internal drive | Register-specific output | Intrinsic motivation
↓ INTERFACE ↓	Translation layer between generative and receptive encoding
	High overlap → frictionless conversion
	Low overlap → translation work (energy tax + fidelity loss)
	No overlap → Dead Voltage (involuntary)
	Refusal → Dead Voltage (volitional)
RECEPTION	Institutional encoding | Historically contingent recognition criteria
↓	
OUTCOME	Recognized / Misrecognized / Unrecognized

Note. Dead Voltage occurs when the Interface fails to convert genuine drive into recognized outcomes. Two primary configurations exist: Involuntary (structural mismatch) and Volitional

(principled refusal). The misrecognition threshold marks the point at which fidelity loss renders recognition misdirected rather than genuine.

3.2 Generation

Generation is the internal production of drive, vision, passion, and creative or intellectual energy, what a person produces when the conditions for honest self-expression are met. It is characterized by intrinsic motivation (drive that does not require external validation to persist), register specificity (generation occurs in a particular mode native to the individual, a specific intellectual idiom, emotional frequency, or creative form that is the product of accumulated experience and cognitive architecture, and is in this respect non-negotiable), and persistence under adversity (genuine generation continues in the absence of reward or recognition). In Dead Voltage, Generation is not the problem. It is functioning exactly as it should.

3.3 Reception

Reception is the capacity of institutions, markets, political structures, and professional hierarchies to recognize, evaluate, and reward incoming output. Reception is never neutral: every system of reception encodes historically contingent preferences, for particular forms of presentation, particular idioms of competence, particular rhythms of production, that reflect the registers of those who built the system. Reception systems are not universal translators. They are highly specific readers that are functionally blind to inputs outside their encoding. The problem

is not that reception systems exist. The problem is that they are routinely treated as universal, as if their particular encoding of value were value itself.

3.4 The Interface

The Interface is where translation must occur, where internal drive must be rendered into a form that external systems can read and reward. It is an active negotiation between two distinct encoding systems. Where overlap between generative and receptive registers is high, conversion is frictionless. Where overlap is low, conversion requires translation work: the effortful rendering of native-register output into a form the system can process. Translation work carries two costs: the energy tax (cognitive and emotional resources consumed by translation rather than Generation) and fidelity loss (the translated output is always a reduction of the original, a compressed, register-adjusted approximation that is not the thing itself). A third cost operates at the systemic level: invisibility of the gap. Because the Interface is not theorized, conversion failure is routinely misattributed, by the system to deficiency in the person, and by the person, absorbing this attribution, to deficiency in themselves.

A fourth Interface condition exists beyond the three-cost structure of involuntary failure: Interface refusal, the condition in which translation is available and understood, and the person declines to engage it on the grounds that the fidelity loss would render the recognized output unrecognizable as what was generated. Interface refusal requires a distinction the model must make explicit: translation capacity (the ability to render native-register output into a legible form) and translation consent (the willingness to do so). These are independent variables. A person may possess translation capacity while withholding translation consent on grounds of

principle. The grounds follow from the logic of recognition itself: recognition of a translated output is not recognition of the generator. It is recognition of the translation. For the person who understands this, strategic translation is not a solution to Dead Voltage, it is its subtler form, in which the circuit closes and the wrong thing gets illuminated.

This position requires the framework to address an assumption that would otherwise remain unexamined: whether pure recognition, reception of the native register without reduction, is a coherent goal. The framework takes a position: pure recognition is asymptotically approachable but not fully achievable. Every Interface imposes some translation cost. This is not a contingent feature of badly designed institutions but a structural feature of the recognition process itself, recognition requires legibility, and legibility always involves some reduction. What varies is degree: from negligible, where generative and receptive registers substantially overlap, to catastrophic, where register adjustment evacuates the generated self entirely. Along this spectrum lies the misrecognition threshold, the point at which translation loss renders the recognized output no longer recognizably the thing that was generated. The Volitional subject's refusal is located at this threshold. It is not a demand for zero translation loss. It is a refusal to accept translation loss beyond the point at which recognition becomes misrecognition.

3.5 The Model as Diagnostic Frame

The tripartite model functions as a diagnostic frame rather than a causal chain. When conversion fails, it directs attention from the default question, what is wrong with the person?, to a more precise set: Is Generation intact? Is Reception functioning? What is the nature of the Interface, what is the degree of register overlap, what translation work is being performed, and at

what cost? And critically: is the non-conversion a function of structural incapacity at the Interface, or of principled refusal to engage the available translation on grounds that it would not preserve what was generated? This last question maps onto the two primary configurations of Dead Voltage and structures the typology in Section VI.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING

4.1 Weber: The Calling Without a Home

Weber's Beruf, the calling experienced as inner demand, assumes institutional fit: the calling finds its home, and conversion is assumed where the calling is genuine. Dead Voltage introduces two cases Weber does not consider: the calling that finds no institutional home because available institutions were not built to receive it, and the calling that identifies its available home and refuses it because what the institution would receive is not the calling but a translation sufficiently reduced to misrepresent it.

4.2 Bourdieu: Capital Misrecognition and Illusio

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital conversion identifies the structural mechanism: agents whose capital lacks field-specific legitimation find their resources systematically devalued. Dead Voltage adds phenomenological depth and dynamic range that Bourdieu's structural determinism cannot reach, and extends his concept of illusio, investment in the field's game as natural and necessary, to the Volitional subject who has seen through illusio and

declines to play the game not from incapacity but from judgment about what the game is actually measuring.

4.3 Fricker: The Hermeneutical Gap and Parallel Evidence

Fricker's (2007) epistemic injustice, particularly hermeneutical injustice, the condition in which a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair epistemic disadvantage, provides the infrastructure for understanding why Dead Voltage has been difficult to name. We propose that Dead Voltage is itself an instance of hermeneutical injustice: a condition widely experienced, consequential in its effects, and lacking until now the conceptual resources to make it fully legible. The construct's novelty is confirmed rather than undermined by Fricker's framework. The Interface mismatch dynamic Dead Voltage theorizes has also been independently documented across multiple social axes: in the sociology of education, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Lareau (2003), Reay (2005), and Ingram (2011) document how class-based generative registers diverge from institutional receptive encodings at systematic cost to those whose registers are not recognized; in professional evaluation, Rivera (2015), Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, and Handelsman (2012), and Heilman (2012) demonstrate that register familiarity is routinely rewarded as merit. These literatures do not share a unified theoretical framework. Dead Voltage provides the unified construct, the mechanism of Interface mismatch, that their parallel observations have not produced from within their own disciplines.

4.4 Fanon: Engineered Mismatch and Collective Refusal

Fanon's (1952, 1961) account of the colonized subject whose interior life has been rendered illegible by the epistemic structures of the colonial order gives Dead Voltage its most politically charged formulation: Interface mismatch that is not accidental but engineered, the product of institutional design oriented toward the recognition of one kind of human being and the systematic non-recognition of another. Fanon also provides the most historically grounded account of collective Interface refusal, the deliberate refusal to produce in the colonizer's register, which is the macro-level form of what the Volitional subject enacts individually. The Fanonian parallel is most precisely applicable to the Structurally Displaced subtype, where exclusion is historically engineered. Dead Voltage also occurs at scales and in contexts where colonial dynamics are not the proximate mechanism; the construct contains but is not exhausted by this formulation.

4.5 Nietzsche: Ressentiment, the Sovereign Individual, and the Audience

Nietzsche's (1887) account of ressentiment, the inward curdling of thwarted power into reactive hatred, describes what Dead Voltage becomes when it is never named and never addressed in its involuntary configurations. Dead Voltage is philosophically earlier: the condition before the curdling. But Nietzsche also theorizes the sovereign individual, the person who has internalized their own law and does not require external validation, who maps precisely onto the Volitional subject. And his preoccupation with the problem of the audience, who one writes for when available readers cannot receive what is being written, gives the Volitional subject's wager its historical form: hold the charge for a posterity capable of reception that the present moment cannot provide.

V. PSYCHOLOGICAL GROUNDING

5.1 Self-Determination Theory and Dead Voltage

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) proposes that psychological wellbeing depends on the satisfaction of three basic needs: competence (the experience of effectiveness), autonomy (the experience of volition and self-authorship), and relatedness (the experience of genuine connection and being known by others). Dead Voltage produces systematic frustration of all three needs simultaneously, but does so differently across its two primary configurations.

In Involuntary Dead Voltage, all three needs are frustrated through the same mechanism. Competence is impaired not at the level of Generation but at the level of feedback: the environment does not respond to the person's output with confirmation of effectiveness, producing chronic competence-signal deprivation despite genuine competence. Autonomy is trapped in a double bind: authentic generation fails to convert, but translated output converts at the cost of evacuating the self, neither option fully satisfies the autonomy need. Relatedness is impaired through structural invisibility: the person is present, contributing, and included, while remaining fundamentally unseen. They are in the room. They are not in the conversation. SDT predicts that sustained frustration of these needs produces motivational deterioration. The persistence paradox of Dead Voltage, the observation that intrinsically motivated drive frequently does not extinguish despite chronic non-recognition, follows from the nature of

intrinsic motivation itself: the reward is internal to the activity, making the behavior more resistant to extinction than extrinsic motivation under conditions of non-reward.

Volitional Dead Voltage produces a previously untheorized SDT configuration: selective need satisfaction as a form of agency. The Volitional subject has resolved the autonomy double bind by choosing authentic generation over conversion. Autonomy is fully satisfied, the person is acting from genuine self-endorsement. Competence and relatedness are chronically frustrated, but the frustration is chosen rather than suffered. The Volitional subject accepts competence-signal deprivation and relational invisibility as the price of refusing signals they regard as misdirected. By preserving autonomy, they preserve the need most directly connected to intrinsic motivation, making them likely to be more motivationally resilient than the involuntary Dead Voltage subject, at the specific cost of more deliberate and conscious deprivation of the other two needs. For the Volitional subject, persistence is not only motivationally explained but ethically chosen: continued generation in the native register is an ongoing claim that what is being generated is real and valuable regardless of whether available circuits can carry it. This is principled testimony, not motivational residue.

5.2 Identity and Clinical Boundaries

In Involuntary Dead Voltage, identity is under siege. The system's non-recognition is experienced as a verdict on the self, a judgment that what one fundamentally is does not register as valuable. Erikson's (1968) concept of identity crisis captures this partially, but Dead Voltage produces a chronic identity siege rather than a developmental crisis: sustained, unresolved, without the resolution that Erikson's framework anticipates. The most consequential endpoint is

register abandonment, the relinquishment of the native generative register in favor of one the system can read, at the cost of the self that was doing the generating. In Volitional Dead Voltage, the identity dynamic is fundamentally different: not erosion but isolation. The Volitional subject is actively defending the generative self against the pressure to abandon it. This defense is more psychologically demanding in a specific way, conscious resistance requires the repeated choice, in the face of available alternatives, to remain unrecognized rather than be recognized as something other than what one is.

This framework does not propose Dead Voltage as a clinical diagnosis. Its upstream relationship to clinical presentations, depression, burnout, anxiety, and motivational collapse among them, parallels what Meyer (2003) identifies as minority stress: a structural condition that, unaddressed, flows toward clinical presentations treated in isolation from their cause. The Volitional configuration requires one additional boundary: principled refusal to translate must not be pathologized as avoidance or oppositional behavior. Misreading it clinically as symptom rather than stance is a specific therapeutic error with serious consequences.

5.3 Toward Measurement

A future Dead Voltage Assessment Scale could operationalize six dimensions: drive authenticity (intrinsically motivated, register-specific, resistant to substitution); conversion history (ratio of genuine effort to recognized outcomes); Interface translation load (energy expended rendering output into institutionally legible forms); recognition deficit (degree to which contribution is received in the form it was offered); persistence under non-recognition (maintenance of generative drive across conversion failure); and translation consent (for the

Volitional subtype: degree to which the person has consciously assessed and declined the available translation mechanism on grounds of fidelity integrity). The proposed diagnostic signature of Volitional Dead Voltage is the combination of high translation capacity and low translation consent, both configurations showing low conversion, but only the Volitional subject showing this specific combination. Future empirical work will be required to determine whether these diagnostic orientations reliably distinguish principled refusal from post hoc rationalization, and whether the proposed measurement dimensions demonstrate sufficient validity and discriminant validity against adjacent constructs.

5.4 Empirical Predictions

As a newly introduced construct, Dead Voltage requires empirical testing before its explanatory claims can be confirmed. We propose the following predictions as an initial empirical agenda. First, individuals experiencing Dead Voltage should show high scores on intrinsic motivation measures alongside low scores on perceived recognition, a dissociation that existing constructs such as learned helplessness (low motivation) or impostor syndrome (distorted recognition perception) do not predict. Second, Interface translation load should predict psychological burnout independently of conscientiousness, providing evidence that translation work carries costs not reducible to individual dispositional factors. Third, recognition deficit should mediate the relationship between Interface mismatch and wellbeing deterioration, such that reduction in perceived recognition, rather than reduction in drive or output quality, accounts for wellbeing decline in Dead Voltage conditions. Fourth, translation consent should

distinguish Volitional from Involuntary Dead Voltage over and above translation capacity, such that the combination of high capacity and low consent uniquely identifies the Volitional configuration. Fifth, Dead Voltage indicators should cluster non-randomly across demographic groups and institutional contexts, consistent with the structural distribution hypothesis. Sixth, Interface work interventions, combining mismatch identification, register affirmation, and structural naming, should produce wellbeing improvements in involuntary Dead Voltage that exceed those produced by standard motivational or cognitive-behavioral protocols. These predictions are offered as a research agenda rather than as established findings, and their confirmation or disconfirmation will determine the construct's empirical utility.

VI. A TYPOLOGY OF DEAD VOLTAGE

6.1 Two Primary Configurations

Dead Voltage takes two primary forms distinguished by whether the non-conversion is chosen or unchosen. In Involuntary Dead Voltage, the person does not choose the failure: structural conditions at the Interface prevent conversion despite genuine drive and sustained effort. In Volitional Dead Voltage, the person understands the Interface, possesses translation capacity, and refuses the available translation on grounds of fidelity integrity. This is not a failure. It is a position. Types I through III are conditions, something that happens to the person at the Interface. The Volitional configuration is a stance, something the person enacts. The distinction structures both the typology and the implications for intervention.

6.2 Involuntary Dead Voltage

Involuntary Dead Voltage encompasses three subtypes that differ in where and why the Interface fails. All three share the same experience of chronic non-recognition without the compensating clarity of chosen incompleteness. All three are candidates for the erosion of identity, the onset of ressentiment if unaddressed, and the eventual collapse into learned helplessness or register abandonment. The subtypes are analytically distinct but empirically entangled, a single individual may occupy more than one across domains or simultaneously within a domain.

6.3 Type I: The Structurally Displaced

Structural Displacement describes individuals whose Interface mismatch is produced by large-scale historical forces, the engineering of recognition systems built, explicitly or implicitly, to receive certain kinds of people and to render others illegible. The mismatch is not accidental. It is an architectural feature. The Structurally Displaced subject generates in a register that is native, authentic, and recognized within the communities that formed them, but the dominant systems of recognition were designed by and for people whose registers differ from theirs. The characteristic experience is a specific and recurring confusion: confirmation of capacity from those close enough to perceive them accurately, alongside systematic non-recognition from the institutions whose recognition carries material consequence. The local community sees. The institution does not.

Illustration. A scholar trained within an oral intellectual tradition submits work to journals whose peer review process encodes conventions of written academic argumentation her native mode does not follow. The work is returned with feedback that addresses conventions she did not employ rather than arguments she made.

6.4 Type II: The Register-Mismatched

Register Mismatch describes individuals whose Interface failure is less political than architectural, a divergence between their native generative register and the registers that available institutions happen to reward. The Register-Mismatched subject generates in a form that available systems have no vocabulary for, not because the system is hostile, but because it was built around different inputs. The characteristic experience is illegibility rather than exclusion: a frustrating inability to make themselves understood to systems that seem, in principle, oriented toward exactly what they are doing. The rejection, when it comes, is often genuinely confused rather than hostile. The subtype is most likely to produce category error feedback, evaluation responses that assess something other than what was offered, accumulating over time as a record not of what the person produces but of the system's inability to receive it.

Illustration. An entrepreneur whose business model integrates domains that existing investment frameworks evaluate separately receives consistent feedback oriented toward whichever single domain the evaluator is most familiar with, never toward the integration that is the actual innovation.

6.5 Type III: The Legible but Excluded

Legible Exclusion describes the most psychologically difficult configuration of involuntary Dead Voltage. The Legible but Excluded subject generates in a register the system can read. Their output is understood. Their competence is perceived. The conversion failure occurs not at legibility but at access: the system sees them and does not open. The feedback loop is broken in a way that cannot be explained by translation failure, the translation is working. The system understands what is being offered. It declines. This forecloses the interpretive escape routes available to the other subtypes: the Structurally Displaced can locate their mismatch in structural history; the Register-Mismatched can locate it in categorical illegibility; the Legible but Excluded cannot locate it at the Interface at all, because the Interface, in a narrow technical sense, is functioning. The charge is transmitted. The circuit still does not close.

Illustration. A candidate whose work is assessed positively through each stage of a hiring process is passed over at the final decision without explanation, across multiple institutions and multiple cycles, without being able to identify what is failing because nothing in the feedback suggests failure.

6.6 Volitional Dead Voltage

Volitional Dead Voltage is not a subtype of involuntary failure. It is a distinct configuration in which the person understands the Interface, has assessed the available translation, and has concluded that the recognition produced would not be recognition of what they generate, it would be recognition of the approximation. The Volitional subject is not the subject of Dead Voltage. They are its agent.

The position has a specific philosophical structure. It is not nihilism, the Volitional subject does not conclude that recognition is worthless. It is not withdrawal, they continue to generate and to present at the Interface. It is not ressentiment, they have not revalued downward what they cannot achieve. It is a sustained refusal to accept contaminated recognition as a substitute for the genuine article, combined with a bet that a circuit exists or will exist in which translation loss falls below the misrecognition threshold, in which enough of the native register survives the Interface to make the recognition genuine rather than misdirected. This circuit may be a different institution, a different historical moment, a differently configured audience, or a posterity capable of reception that the present moment cannot provide.

The phenomenological texture of the Volitional position is distinctive. It contains a paradoxical lucidity: the person knows exactly why their circuit is incomplete and chose the incompleteness. This lucidity is protective, it prevents the misattribution of structural failure to personal deficiency. But it has its own cost. The Volitional subject cannot take refuge in hope that the circuit will close if they persist differently. They have closed that interpretive escape route themselves. What remains is the sustained knowledge that the circuit is incomplete by design, their design, and that maintaining it requires continuous choice under conditions of non-recognition, material consequence, and relational deprivation.

Distinguishing principled refusal from motivated avoidance is necessary for the theoretical coherence of this configuration. Three operational criteria serve as diagnostic orientations. First, temporal precedence: principled refusal follows demonstrated translation capacity, the Volitional subject must have shown, at minimum through a sustained private understanding of what the translation would require, that they possess the ability to translate prior to refusing. Second, specificity of the fidelity objection: principled refusal identifies

precisely what would be lost in translation and why that loss constitutes misrecognition rather than acceptable reduction. Third, conditional engagement: principled refusal is conditional on the available terms, the Volitional subject would accept register adjustment if a circuit appeared that did not require the specific fidelity losses they object to. These are interior markers for self-examination, not instruments of external classification.

Illustration. A composer who has successfully produced work in commercially legible forms declines to continue doing so, identifying precisely which features of the commercial register would need to be eliminated from her native mode to produce institutional recognition, and remaining open to commissions that could accommodate those features.

6.7 The Configurations in Relation

The two primary configurations, Involuntary and Volitional, are analytically distinct but empirically entangled. A single individual may inhabit both across different domains simultaneously. The post-colonial intellectual who generates in a genuinely cross-disciplinary register, is denied institutional access on grounds that are neither wholly structural nor wholly categorical, and has assessed the available translation as insufficient to the calling, this person occupies Structural Displacement, Register Mismatch, Legible Exclusion, and the Volitional position simultaneously. The typology is not designed to sort people into fixed categories. It is designed to give the Interface the diagnostic resolution it requires.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Recognition Theory

Recognition theory, developed most systematically by Honneth (1992, 1995) following Hegel, argues that human identity depends fundamentally on being recognized by others. Where recognition is withheld, the result is a specific moral injury that strikes at the foundations of self-relation and social participation. Dead Voltage extends recognition theory in three directions. First, non-recognition can be structural rather than agentive: it can occur without any intentional act of disrespect and without an identifiable agent, demanding an expansion of the framework's moral vocabulary beyond the elimination of discriminatory intent. Second, recognition of a translation is not recognition of the self: a theory of recognition that cannot make this distinction is insufficient to the moral demands of Interface mismatch. Third, and most challenging to recognition theory's foundational assumptions, the Volitional subject questions whether recognition is always worth pursuing. Honneth's framework assumes the struggle for recognition as a fundamental human drive. The Volitional subject suggests that recognition on corrupted terms is not merely insufficient but actively harmful to the self doing the generating. Recognition theory requires an account of the rational refusal of recognition.

7.2 Institutional Ethics

Every institution, in being built, makes choices about what kinds of output it will recognize, what forms of competence it will reward, what rhythms and idioms of production it will evaluate as valuable. These choices encode the preferences of founders and early gatekeepers and persist structurally long after those founders have gone. Institutions that exercise

significant power over human outcomes bear an obligation to periodically examine and expand their receptive encoding, not to abandon standards but to interrogate whether current standards are evaluating what they purport to evaluate or whether they are evaluating conformity to a historically contingent encoding that mistakes its preferences for universal criteria. A further implication concerns translation labor: institutions that benefit from the translated output of Interface-mismatched individuals while remaining unreformed in their encoding are extracting unpaid labor, work that some people must perform and others do not. Dead Voltage names this extraction as such and grounds an ethical claim: the cost of Interface translation should not be borne exclusively by the person who generates.

Any construct introduced as structural critique faces the risk of institutional absorption: adoption of the vocabulary without the structural reform the vocabulary demands. The measure of institutional seriousness about Dead Voltage is not whether it names the Interface. It is whether it examines and reforms its own receptive encoding, and whether those whose encoding is currently preferred are willing to bear the cost of that reform. Naming and repairing are not the same act.

7.3 Psychological Practice

The person experiencing Dead Voltage may present with what looks like depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, or motivational deficit. Standard protocols applied without awareness of the Interface condition may relieve suffering without addressing its structural cause. Effective support requires Interface work: five components differentiated by configuration. For involuntary Dead Voltage: mismatch identification (locating the specific point of conversion

failure), register affirmation (validating the native generative register as real and not in need of replacement), strategic translation support (developing translation capacity without requiring fidelity loss beyond the misrecognition threshold), and structural naming (identifying the institutional forces contributing to the mismatch, restoring an accurate account against the misattribution that chronic non-recognition produces). For Volitional Dead Voltage, refusal recognition (distinguishing principled refusal from motivated avoidance, and holding these as categorically different clinical situations requiring different responses) and wager support (the sustained examination of whether the refusal is being made with full clarity about what is being refused, and whether the conditions under which the bet might pay off are being actively sought). Offering translation support to a Volitional subject who has already assessed and declined it is not therapeutic assistance. It is institutional pressure wearing a clinical mask.

7.4 Policy

Current talent identification systems reward output legibility, they identify individuals whose output is already readable by the evaluating system. This is circular: it reproduces the receptive encoding of the institution rather than identifying the full range of genuine capacity available. Dead Voltage suggests that any such system that does not attend to Interface mismatch is not identifying talent. It is identifying legibility. Policy frameworks for equity and access typically address the formal opening of institutional doors. Dead Voltage argues that access without receptive reform produces a more demographically diverse population of Dead Voltage subjects, people formally inside the system and structurally invisible within it. The ethical and policy obligation extends beyond opening doors to examining what happens to those who enter.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced Dead Voltage as a theoretical construct that locates persistent non-conversion not within the person or the institution, but at the Interface between them, describing the systematic failure of genuine internal drive to convert into externally recognized outcomes through register mismatch between generative and receptive encoding. The paper distinguishes two primary configurations: Involuntary Dead Voltage, in which structural conditions prevent conversion across three subtypes, and Volitional Dead Voltage, in which the person refuses the available terms of conversion on grounds of fidelity integrity. The construct has been grounded philosophically and psychologically, operationalized through a tripartite model and a six-dimension measurement framework, and its implications developed for recognition theory, institutional ethics, psychological practice, and policy.

Dead Voltage is not an excuse. It does not argue that all unconverted drive is genuine or that all conversion failure is structural. The three criteria, authenticity, effort, residual non-conversion, enforce the boundary. It is not a counsel of despair: it is introduced at the moment before ressentiment, when the drive is intact and the circuit, though incomplete, has not been abandoned. It is not a condition that always demands repair in the direction of conversion: the Volitional subject holds the circuit deliberately open, and that position deserves a framework adequate to what it costs. And it is not a personal failure. It is a relational failure, located at the Interface between a person and a system, produced there, and requiring examination there. Responsibility for addressing it is distributed between the person navigating the Interface and the institutions whose receptive encoding produces the mismatch. Current frameworks assign this

responsibility almost entirely to the person. Dead Voltage argues for redistribution, not as an act of charity, but as an act of accuracy about where the failure lives.

Open questions remain: empirical validation of the measurement dimensions including the translation consent criterion; specification of the misrecognition threshold and whether it can be operationalized with sufficient precision; development of Interface work and wager support as structured therapeutic protocols; engagement with non-Western philosophical traditions on recognition and illegibility; investigation of how translation capacity is acquired and distributed; and the question of what institutional receptive encoding reform looks like in practice. These are the questions a first-articulation theoretical paper generates. They constitute the research agenda Dead Voltage opens.

The charge is real. It has always been real. What has been missing is a name for the gap, and a framework precise enough to locate it, to distinguish it from the person on one side and the system on the other, to differentiate the gap that is suffered from the gap that is chosen, and to make the question of how to close it, or whether to, a question that can finally, seriously, be asked.

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